

Noon Flower: An iconic plant species and a link across time to the life of early Melbourne

Introduction

Many cities don't have anything special to offer insofar as geophysical features are concerned, because either they never had them in the first place, or they have long since been lost to urban development. Melbourne is a case in point of the latter, as James Boyce (2011: 211) records:

By the time Anthony Trollope visited Melbourne, then a city of 206,000 'souls' in the early 1870s, the city had already largely turned its back on the Yarra (River), drained the swamps, filled in the lakes and flattened the hills, so that Trollope knew 'of no great town in the neighborhood of which there is less to see in the way of landscape beauty.'

Boyce further details the stunning ecological features of that lost landscape (2011: 4):

This natural bridge where salt water and fresh water met was also where geology and botany divided in an apex of ecological encounter. Within an easy walk could be found grasslands, various woodlands, as well as, in almost every direction, mud. On the northern side of the river stretching three kilometres to the north-west, 'was a wide expanse of boggy land greater than 1000 acres ... in extent'. In the middle of this was a permanent lagoon which one early settler recalled as a 'beautiful blue lake ... intensely blue, nearly oval and full of the clearest saltwater' but this by no means deep'. On the southern side of the Yarra between the river and the edge of the bay, swampy land stretched for about six and a half kilometres and included a number of permanent lagoons including what was to become (with more than a little taming) Albert Park Lake. There were also extensive lagoons in the region of what is now Port Melbourne. By contrast much of today's central business district was well-drained grasslands framed by gentle and lightly wooded hills, such as Batmans Hill, where Southern Cross Station now stands, and the pastoral plains stretched far to the north and west.

Today you're really hard pressed to find any remnants of this truly magical place. Boyce points to a couple of river red gums in the lower reaches of the Botanic Gardens. But a further unexpected relic is *Disphyma crassifolius* ssp. *clavellatum*, commonly called Rounded Leaf

Noon Flower (original botanic name *Mesembryanthemum* sp.) which grows as a prostrate, succulent or perennial herb, from 2 to 30 centimetres high. Unlike the other Aizoaceae its leaves are round in cross-section and it does not hybridise with them. Flowers are pink, purple or violet (Fig. 1).

Local Aborigines used its succulent leaves as the source of a refreshing but astringent drink and the juice was also applied as an antiseptic on scratches and insect bites (Watson, APS Website). Rounded Leaf Noon Flower was a signature plant for much of early central Melbourne, as shown by the following extracts:

Pigface

'The encroaching pigface pours its molten magenta down the sides of cuttings.' (Furnley Maurice 1934)

Where has all the pigface gone? The vivid-flow-ered succulent is everywhere in accounts of Melbourne from its earliest days up to the mid-20th century. The Blue Lake at the west end of town was wreathed around with it. In Dr Godfrey Howitt's Collins Street garden of 1853 were 'beds of mesembryanthemum ... brilliant with florescence'. Perhaps the pigeons ate it all.

(Annear 2009: 81)

Blue Lake

During Melbourne's first five or ten years (and for untold years before that) a shallow sheet of water known as the Blue Lake stretched north-west from Batman's Hill, encompassing the site of today's Docklands. Before long, though, grazing cattle trampled it into a morass, so that it merged with the West Melbourne swamp before disappearing altogether in the 1860s when it was filled up and buried under rail yards and waste ground. George Gordon McCrae, a boy in the early 1840s, would recall - 'a real lake, blue, nearly oval, and full of the clearest salt water, though by no means deep. Fringed gaily all round with the purple mesembryanthemum [pigface] in full bloom, it seemed in the broad sunshine to be girdled by a belt of magenta fire'. (Annear 2009: 12). (Fig. 2)



Fig. 1. A *Disphyma crassifolius* ssp. *clavellatum* floral carpet, photographed in Tasmania. (Sourced from Australian Plant Society – Tasmania website.)



Fig. 2. Robert Hoddle's watercolor 'Near Melbourne 1847' has captured the top corner of the Blue lake with Mount Macedon in the left background. (Sourced from State Library of Victoria.)

Coode Island

The sky was ablaze with skylarks ... every few yards there were nests on the ground. Springtime was full of their music. Sometimes there were dolphins in the river. The most beautiful thing I have ever seen was the pigface growing on the island in spring. It was a swamp in the middle before they drained it. I will never forget that pigface. (Lahey 1994:7).

Relic Population

A relic population, scale-free and thick on the ground, was uncovered by Ian Taylor of Western Plains Flora Nursery at the southern-most end of Dudley Street on both banks of the Moonee Ponds Creek (nee Railway Canal) in the early 1990s. The area in question is rather neglected but clothed in some native plantings under the Bolte Bridge and presently teeming with rabbits.

Reference to Russell's 1837 map of Melbourne (Fig. 3) and a later map depicting an enlarged street grid shows that this point corresponds to the south-eastern boundary of the lake which Russell had labelled 'Salt Lake'. The plant in

question was discovered at a point in time when there had been no introduced native plants, the site otherwise being a wasteland.

The Moonee Ponds Creek here is represented by the vestiges of the Railway Canal excavated along the channel of the creek in the late 1880s to provide access for coal barges to a landing stage near the North Melbourne Locomotive Depot. The various works along this stretch of waterway - it was narrowed at one stage - would have left at least some overburden in the vicinity from which the plant has regenerated (Arnott pers. comm. 2010).

There is also a local population of angle leaf pigface, Karkolla *Carpobrotus rossii* (Fig. 5).

The way forward

It is recommended that, in view of Rounded Leaf Noon Flower's link across time to pre- and early settlement of Melbourne, the area where the relic population is found, be:

- Cleaned out of weeds and any other inappropriate species amidst the population and integrated into the Port of Melbourne Corpo-



Fig. 3. Russell's 1837 map of Melbourne shows the area of the Blue Lake, depicted as Salt Lake. (Sourced from State Library of Victoria.)

ration's Shared Spaces landscape plan for the area;

- Boardwalks be established;
- Interpretative signage erected of the plant and its historic association with the Lake and early Melbourne;
- The reserve be called Blue Lake Noon Flower Park or something similar;
- Docklands Way be renamed Noon Flower Way or Blue Lake Way.

References

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Fig. 5. Pigface *Carpobrotus rossii* pictured at Altona. (Photo reproduced from *The Yarra: a natural treasure* by David and Cam Beardsell.)